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Ladies in fur, Traveling Through Time

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Ladies in fur, Traveling Through Time

Abstract

The Penn Museum holds a variety of dolls from Arctic environs, including those collected by William Van Valin, George Byron Gordon, Captain George Comer, and the Peary Relief Expedition. Most of the items classified as “dolls” are small wooden figures; only a few represent realistic renditions of Arctic clothing. This Inuit (Eskimo) doll from Greenland (object number 37-14-7) stands out in that she reflects a meticulous level of detail from the minuscule stitching on her kamiks to the precise mode of styling and wrapping her hair to signal marital status. As noted by Monica Fenton in her blog, “The Lady in Furs,” the construction of this doll’s clothing matches the construction of adult Inuit women’s clothing. Who made this doll, and what was her purpose? Her dress is said to represent a married Inuit woman, but does she also represent a specific individual? Whose hair is on her head? How did she make her way to the Museum?

Disciplines

Anthropology | Social and Behavioral Sciences

LADIES IN FUR, TRAVELING THROUGH TIME

By: Margaret Bruchac



(<http://penn.museum/collections/object/287402>)

Inuit (Eskimo) doll from Arsuk, Greenland. Photo by Margaret Bruchac with permission of the Penn Museum. Museum Object Number: 37-14-7
(<http://penn.museum/collections/object/287402>).

The Penn Museum holds a variety of dolls from Arctic environs, including those collected by William Van Valin, George Byron Gordon, Captain George Comer, and the Peary Relief Expedition. Most of the items classified as “dolls” are small wooden figures; only a few represent realistic renditions of Arctic clothing. This Inuit (Eskimo) doll from Greenland (object number 37-14-7 (<http://penn.museum/collections/object/287402>)) stands out in that she reflects a meticulous level of detail from the minuscule stitching on her kamiks to the precise mode of styling and wrapping her hair to signal marital status. As noted by Monica Fenton in her blog, “The Lady in Furs,” the construction of this doll’s clothing matches the construction of adult Inuit women’s clothing. Who made this doll, and what was her purpose? Her dress is said to represent a married Inuit woman, but does she also represent a specific individual? Whose hair is on her head? How did she make her way to the Museum?

Questions of Provenance

The history of the doll’s accession reveals an interesting chain of provenance. A note housed in collections storage indicates that she was originally: “made by an Eskimo of Arsuk, Greenland, and given to Governor Korse’s wife and then given to me,” during the Peary North Greenland Expedition in 1894.[1] The artisan who created this doll and the Governor’s wife are unnamed, but the “me” (written on a note curated with the doll) happens to be Eivind Astrup (<http://www.lookandlearn.com/history-images/U329722/The-late-Eivind-Astrup-Arctic-Explorer>) (1871-1894), a budding scholar who left Philadelphia in 1892 to join the Peary Relief Expedition (<http://www.ansp.org/research/library/archives/0100-0199/coll0145/>) mounted by Angelo Heilprin, Curator of the Academy of the Natural Science in Philadelphia.[2]



Detail of Greenland Inuit doll's hand. Photo by Margaret Bruchac with permission of Penn Museum.

Astrup is legendary in the annals of Arctic exploration. He assisted Peary in mapping northern Greenland, and was second in command while mapping Melville Bay in 1893-4, with the assistance of Inuit guide Kolotengva. He described his encounters with Inuit people and practices in his book, *With Peary near the North Pole* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=gz8NAQAIAAJ&pg=PA6&lpg=PA6&dq=%22eivind+astrup%22&source=bl&ots=-o7PoQPSTA&sig=DI5-8TJmz76K6zKP8ofHZBknWys&hl=en&sa=X&ei=lbRGVaSIJs38gwSBi4HIDw&ved=0CBQQ6AEwADg8#v=onepage&q=%22eivind%20astrup%22&f=false>) (1898, published posthumously).[3], Yet, he was not an ethnographic collector. Why, then, was this doll “given” to him by the Governor’s wife? Was the doll intended as a gift for a young girl, or for another woman? Was she collected as a tourist curiosity? There are some curious scratchmarks on her left hand; these might be a date and signature, but they are illegible. The collection of objects attributed to Astrup (donated to the Penn Museum by Samuel Ingraham) is sparse—a few tools, a few items of clothing—with virtually no contextual details that shed light on their origins. It’s likely that those objects, along with this doll, were found among Astrup’s possessions after he perished during a solo ski journey in 1894.

The Penn Museum holds a few similar items associated with another expedition to Greenland: a suit of life-sized Inuit women’s clothing collected from Godhaven. The collection card reads: “Made by order of the Governor of the Peary Relief Expedition 1892.” There is no indication, however, who these clothes were *for* or *from*. These clothes are clearly not new; they show marks of use and fading that suggest everyday outside wear. The shoulders and arms of the parka are faded from exposure to the sun over time (while the underarm colors are still bright), and the boots and trousers show creases from walking. The name of the Inuit artisan is not recorded, but close material examination reveals that she used precisely the same dyes, same threads, and same patterns as the maker of the doll. This suggests that these items reflect, if not the same maker, then the same regional tradition, with shared materials and techniques. Eivind Astrup noticed this marked conformity in Inuit clothing, writing, “Not one of them has a single dress which is not cut exactly from the same pattern, and made of skins from the same source.”[4]

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(<http://www.penn.museum/blog/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/n3708.jpg>)

Greenland Eskimo Dolls, lot 805, sold at Cowan’s American Indian Art Auction, September 18-19, 2004. Formerly in the collections of the First People’s Museum of the American Indian and Eskimo.

Although her history is somewhat mysterious, the doll herself is not unusual. Similarly detailed miniature representations of Arctic people and clothing survive in other museum collections. One stunning pair of dolls, in winter and summer dress (<http://www.cowanauctions.com/auctions/item.aspx?id=11284>) (shown here) was de-accessioned from the First People's Museum of the American Indian and Eskimo and sold at a Cowan's auction in 2004. The sheer volume of these dolls, in public and private collections, suggests that they were likely made for home use *and* for trade. Over time, they acquired meanings that served multiple purposes. In their home communities, they provided cultural role models and training in techniques of sewing for Inuit girls. Outside of Greenland, they communicated authentic representations of Greenland's Inuit women to the rest of the world.

The Greenland tourism site (<http://www.greenland.com/en/about-greenland/culture-spirit/traditional-dress/>) notes that this style of clothing (with some modern adaptations) is also a form of cultural performance when donned for special occasions (including the arrival of tourist ships).[5] Today, some Inuit girls and women wear sealskin and leather with appliques and parkas of trade cloth and glass beads; others don elaborately beaded multi-colored collars and lacy kamiks in bright colors that nod to the aesthetics of the past while celebrating the vibrancy of the present.

In all of these iterations, Greenland's "traditional" garb combines Inuit and Euro-American materials in ways that reflect Indigenous aesthetics: Native ivory, leather, and fur; Euro-American cloth, silk ribbon, and glass beads; and thread and stitching techniques that indicate the use of a small metal needle.[6] This syncretic

style was, in fact, made possible by the abundance of trade objects offered to the Inuit by Arctic explorers. The Peary Relief Expedition from Philadelphia, for example, brought the following goods to repay Inuit people for their services and assistance: "pots, kettles, knives, scissors, thimbles, and needles for the women, and for the men, lances, saws, gimlets, knives, timber and other hardware items." [7]

With all of this in mind, the Arctic doll given to Eivind Astrup is more than a toy, and more than a mere tourist collectible. This doll, when presented to an outsider (under the right circumstances) held the almost magical potential to reproduce herself by attracting (and transacting for) more of the valuable trade resources that were, and could be, used to dress her and her kin.

Footnotes:

[1] From notes on the collection card and a typewritten note in the Penn Museum storage area, curated with the doll in collections.

[2] See *Eivind Astrup – An Arctic Pioneer*— (<https://www.facebook.com/Frammuseum/posts/642288045869612>) a 2014 documentary by the Fram Museum in Oslo, Norway.

[3] Astrup, Eivind. 1898. *With Peary near the North Pole*. Translated from the Norwegian by H.J. Bull London: C. Arthur Pearson Ltd; Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company.

[4] Ibid. P. 89.

[5] "Greenland Eskimo Dolls" (<http://www.cowanauctions.com/auctions/item.aspx?id=11284>) Lot 805. Ex First People's Museum of the American Indian and Eskimo. Cowan's American Indian Art Auction, September 18-19, 2004.

[6] "Traditional Dress." (<http://www.greenland.com/en/about-greenland/culture-spirit/traditional-dress/>) *About Greenland*. The Official Tourism Site of Greenland.

[7] Ethnographic photos show the persistence and uniformity of these material and designs. See, for example, the garb worn by these two teenagers photographed in 1930 by Henry Iffle Cozens (<http://www.spri.cam.ac.uk/library/pictures/catalogue/article/p48.16.57/>), during the British Arctic Air Route Expedition (<http://www.spri.cam.ac.uk/library/pictures/catalogue/baare/>). *Freeze-Frame: Historic Polar Images*. Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge.

[8] Henderson, Bruce. 2005. *True North: Peary, Cook, and the Race to the Pole* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=30vHyeROKh8C&pg=PA77&lpg=PA77&dq=kettles,+knives,+scissors,+thimbles,+and+needles+for+the+women,+and+for+the+men,+lances,+saws,+gimlets,+knives>) New York, BY: W.W. Norton and Company, p. 77.

NOTE: For more information on traditional and modern Greenland Inuit dress, see J.C.H. King, Birgit Pauksztat, and Robert Storrie, eds. 2005. *Arctic Clothing of North-America-Alaska, Canada, Greenland* (<http://www.amazon.com/Arctic-Clothing-North-America-Greenland/dp/0773530088>). Montreal, Quebec: McGill Queen's University Press.



(<http://www.penn.museum/blog/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/aa0250.jpg>)

Two Greenland Eskimo Dolls, lot 44. Sold at Cowan's American Indian and Western Art Auction, September 15, 2007.